

Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION^{Review}

Field Report
The Nonprofit Decolonizing Itself
By Eric Kawa

Stanford Social Innovation Review
Summer 2023

Copyright © 2023 by Leland Stanford Jr. University
All Rights Reserved

Stanford Social Innovation Review
www.ssir.org
Email: editor@ssir.org

FIELD REPORT

Profiles of innovative work

The Nonprofit Decolonizing Itself

OneVillage Partners is transforming the meaning of partnership by shifting from community-led programs to becoming a community-led organization.

BY ERIC KAWA

Sierra Leone has faced educational, social, and economic challenges in the decades following the country's independence from Britain in 1961, including a decade-long civil war that ended in 2002 and the largest Ebola outbreak in history, from 2014 to 2015. The poverty rate is 64 percent, life expectancy is only 60 years, and across rural Sierra Leone the literacy rate is 48 percent. Only 16 percent of the population has access to basic sanitation, and only 2 percent has access to potable water.

After the war, outside help poured in from governments, NGOs, and philanthropists. Oxfam, the International Rescue Committee, and other international aid groups shifted their emergency-response work to reconstruction efforts.

Like other aid groups, the Minneapolis, Minnesota-based nonprofit OneVillage Partners aimed to provide assistance to struggling communities in Sierra Leone. Commercial real estate developer Jeff Hall founded the nonprofit in 2005, inspired by his visit with friends who had survived the civil war and were living in camps for displaced persons. These friendships began in 1987 when Hall worked as a Peace Corps volunteer in rural Eastern Sierra Leone.

OneVillage Partners believes that community partnerships are the foundation for successfully addressing and finding

solutions to multidimensional poverty. The organization provides both financial support and project management to communities, and it also connects community leaders with one another to collaborate on shared challenges.

Relationships are the building blocks of the nonprofit's efforts. "OneVillage Partners' work is grounded in being community-led and asking people what they need and how can we help so that they can improve their lives," says Jill LaLonde, the nonprofit's executive director.

COMMUNITY-LED DEVELOPMENT

OneVillage Partners begins work in a community by first convening its members and asking them to select 12 residents to represent them in a community action group (CAP). These volunteers act as liaisons

and sanitation issues. Each community has designed a project unique to its circumstances. While one community might rehabilitate broken wells, another might require entirely new wells. One community might charge well-users for each use, while another may tax the entire community for open access. Many communities have built latrines for improved sanitation and have educated their residents on the importance of utilizing and maintaining these facilities. In 2022, communities that implemented water and sanitation projects reported on average a 73 percent reduction in diarrheal disease, according to OneVillage Partners' data.

In 2020, CAP volunteers in the eastern Sierra Leone community of Grima created a project to renovate their community health clinic and improve its services to address the high maternal and child



A community action group takes a vote at a meeting in the province of Baaka, Sierra Leone.

between the community and OneVillage Partners staff. OneVillage Partners facilitates project-management training for CAP and brings in technical experts and partners on projects as needed.

All 32 communities with which the nonprofit has worked have prioritized water

mortality rates—10 children under 5, or 1 percent of Grima's total population, died in 2019 alone. OneVillage Partners provided leadership training and support, as well as a grant to cover construction and other material costs. The Grima community built the structure and installed solar

lights, tiled floors, and basic amenities like running water. Volunteers also played a significant role in educating the community on communal ownership and raising funds to maintain the clinic. Just one year after the clinic was built, in 2021, only two children younger than 5 died.

Momoh Musa, a lead volunteer on the project, attributes this positive change to the increased number of pregnant women choosing to give birth in the clinic. “The community health clinic is equipped with trained and qualified nurses,” he notes.

OneVillage Partners also endeavors to bolster gender equity. For example, the Nurturing Opportunities for Women program educates women and families on financial literacy and business skills.

The nonprofit realized that community-led projects did not equate to community-led leadership at an organizational level.

To replace an off-the-shelf curriculum that wasn’t producing positive results, OneVillage Partners’ staff developed a new training program that is entirely picture-based and begins with a lesson on how to hold a pencil. By working closely with the women they intended to help, the updated program now reaches the most marginalized—those who are illiterate or without much formal education but are capable of and eager to learn new skills.

While OneVillage Partners receives support from individual donors and fundraising, nearly a quarter of its funding comes from grant funders and businesses, the latter of which provide support through event sponsorships. One of the reasons OneVillage Partners can give partner communities decision-making power is because a large portion of its funding is unrestricted.

The Minnesota-based Mortenson Family Foundation has given unrestricted funding to OneVillage Partners for the past nine years. Danyelle O’Hara, the foundation’s community relationship officer, explains that their long-standing support is “motivated by the outcomes that OneVillage Partners has had over the years,” including “the way that community

capacity has been built in real, tangible ways to be able to build community infrastructure and improve community lives.”

POWER SHIFT

Today, OneVillage Partners operates in 32 partner communities and 8 chiefdoms across Eastern Sierra Leone. There are 53 staff in Sierra Leone and 4 staff in the United States. The nonprofit has long prided itself on being community-led but recently realized that community-led projects did not equate to community-led leadership at an organizational level. While people from rural Sierra Leone were involved in making programmatic decisions, the organization’s headquarters—including the leadership team and board of directors—is

based in the United States. The leadership and board also are composed primarily of white people and are not representative of the communities they serve.

According to LaLonde, the police murder of George Floyd, in May 2020, in Minneapolis—home of their headquarters—catalyzed them to talk more deeply about racial justice and their work in international development. The team began asking questions around power and representation, delving into what strategic and operational changes could be made to shift power to increase local representation and how this shift could make the work more effective and sustainable.

Chad McCordic, the Sierra Leone-based country director of OneVillage Partners, stressed that the organization has wanted not just to preach but to practice decolonization.

“It is a good way for us to look at implicit and explicit power,” McCordic says. “It also helps explain to our donors and supporters how and why some of the challenges that are faced by people in Sierra Leone can be tied back to colonization and its effects.”

OneVillage Partners also has operationalized this power shift by creating a

diversity, equity, inclusion, and decolonization committee to help the board of directors and staff identify and execute proactive strategies to improve representation. The committee has addressed topics such as compensation structure, external communications and language, and the ethics of group travel from the United States to Sierra Leone.

A milestone in this work was the board drafting and adopting a new strategic plan in 2022, which outlines programmatic expansion, significant leadership and structural changes, and a renewed commitment to community-led values. In the coming years, OneVillage Partners plans to expand its programming in Sierra Leone and through partnerships. Until 2022, OneVillage Partners had been working in just one district. By 2028, the organization aims to have a presence in all 15 rural districts across the country. Significant to this expansion will be identifying local individuals and community-based organizations that are doing work toward similar goals and finding ways to strengthen the collective work through partnership.

The new strategy also lays out the commitment to move from the current leadership structure to one centered on proximate leadership. Specifically, OneVillage Partners seeks to shift power so that its organization’s strategy, operations, and programming are defined and led by Sierra Leoneans. On an operational level, this means hiring an executive director based in Sierra Leone and transitioning their primarily US-based board to a global board of directors, with a focus on recruiting Sierra Leoneans. Thus far, work has consisted of preparing for these changes—most important, reorganizing the staff leadership structure and elevating Sierra Leoneans into leadership positions.

Everyone at OneVillage Partners is quick to emphasize that they still have much to learn about decolonizing the nonprofit. “We will make mistakes, and that’s okay,” LaLonde says, “but the important piece is that we learn from those mistakes and that we continue to interrogate the ways we work in order to be more effective in the future.” ●

ERIC KAWA is a journalist based in Freetown, Sierra Leone.